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**Dead End Writing and Standardized Exams: A Deeper Look into Why Our  
Students Struggle with Writing**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In my thesis, I am hypothesizing the possibility that our students are undergoing writer's block when trying to write for standardized exams. Through the research I have studied on writer's block and the discourse I have had with colleagues and students, I have found a high correlation between why our students' struggle with creating writing for standardized exams and the reasons why writers tend to block during the writing process. Through examining the common reasons why our students struggle with writing and the causes for writer's block, I have come to my own conclusion that it isn't that our students are simply unable to write or don't feel like producing good writing when taking high stakes exams, but that they are feeling psychologically and emotionally threatened and threatened by environment in which they are writing. When students feel

threatened while writing, they undergo many of the common writer's block symptoms, which is why they struggle to create any meaningful cohesive writing.

To support my hypothesis, I will be focusing on the emotional and psychological issues that students face when trying to write for standardized exams. I will break down the different kind of emotional and psychological threats that cause our students to struggle with writing and show the relationship between these threats and the threats that cause writers to block. I will also examine the environmental issues that negatively impact our students when trying to write for exams and again show that there is a possibility that students are blocking due to the various environmental implications I will be discussing.

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## **Dead End Writing and Standardized Exams: A Deeper Look into Why Our Students Struggle to Create**

We've all been there at some point or another: sitting in the teacher's lounge and complaining or listening to other teachers complain that their students just don't know how to write, and how are they ever going to pass the Regents or ELA exam. We all hope that we're not the only teachers that have students unable to write, and as a matter of some kind of reinforcement, we all console each other in acknowledging that we too have the same problem. We come up with reasons and excuses on why our students struggle with writing by saying, "Kids just don't care about writing; it's all because of text messaging and instant messaging that students don't know how to write properly; they just don't get how to write an essay from beginning to end; they're too lazy, and they can't sit at the computer to write for any period of time without being distracted and going on the internet or playing games." I too have uttered these words to colleagues and friends when discussing student writing, but what I have come to realize overtime is that all of these excuses blame our students, and not our selves as educators. Perhaps it's not our students who are at fault for being unable to write, but maybe it's our own for not looking at the bigger picture.

While taking a graduate course on the teaching of writing, I noticed that many teachers discussed their students' inability to write for standardized exams whether it was practice writing, or actual writing for the upcoming exam. At the

time, I was also writing a paper for this particular class on writer's block. What I began to notice through our class discussions and my studying of writer's block, was that there seemed to be a correlation between writer's block and possible reasons why students weren't performing well when trying to write for these exams. As a result, I kept this notion in my mind, and when I began to teach the upcoming year, I made a point to ask my students about their writing when they did poorly on the writing sections of their exams. Indeed, what I found was that many of my students' responses on why they did poorly in their writing had a high correlation with what occurs when one undergoes writer's block. Although students didn't articulate their feelings with the language and terminology used in discussing writer's block, they did provide emotional reasons as to why they didn't perform well and environmental issues that posed a threat during their writing process.

Let it be noted, that I am merely hypothesizing the possibility that our students are undergoing writer's block when trying to write for standardized exams. Through the research I have studied on writer's block and the discourse I have had with colleagues and students, I have found a high correlation between why our students' struggle with creating writing for standardized exams and the reasons why writers tend to block during the writing process. Through examining the common reasons why our students struggle with writing and the causes for writer's block, I have come to my own conclusion that it isn't that our students are simply unable to write or don't feel like producing good writing when taking high

stakes exams, but that they are feeling psychologically and emotionally threatened and threatened by environment in which they are writing. When students feel threatened while writing, they undergo many of the common writer's block symptoms, which is why they struggle to create any meaningful cohesive writing.

To support my hypothesis, in the first section I will be focusing on the emotional and psychological issues that students face when trying to write for standardized exams. I will break down the different kind of emotional and psychological threats that cause our students to struggle with writing and show the relationship between these threats and the threats that cause writers to block. In the following section, I will examine the environmental issues that negatively impact our students when trying to write for exams and again show that there is a possibility that students are blocking due to the various environmental implications I will be discussing.

### **Emotional and Psychological Issues in Writing**

Writing is an emotional process. When writing, we are letting go of our inner thoughts and pouring it onto paper. Sometimes we are able to encapsulate our emotions onto to paper, and other times we find it difficult and tedious to put our feelings into words. Our students go through a similar process; therefore, it is not surprising to suggest that students undergo psychological and emotional blocks when taking pressure-filled exams. Standardized exams exert pressure on

students that increase some students' levels of anxiety. According to Kellogg, "anxiety can paralyze the thinker or at least produce detrimental effects on thinking operations" (111). Consequently, "If the task arouses anxiety, then the defense mechanism of repression may limit access to the very content and discourse knowledge needed to complete the task" (113). Students become paralyzed by the idea that they have to translate their feelings into writing, while having to make sure that they pass the exam qualifications. It is no wonder why many times our students choose not to do the writing sections at all. Before I begin explaining the correlations I found between writer's block and my students' struggle to write for exams, let me briefly explain how writing apprehension and blocks are linked to the psychology of the mind.

According to John Daly, writing apprehension is a psychological disorder that can be linked to test anxiety (47). Writing apprehension and performance in standardized exams has an unsurprising correlation concluding that, "the higher the writing apprehension, the lower the performance" (Daly 55). In a psychological perspective of writing apprehension, the term writer's block is often used to explain the writer's struggle to create.

According to Freud's theory on the id (instinctive animal part of ourselves), ego (the socially aware and conscious aspect), and superego (the moralistic portion of ourselves that forbids and prohibits), our conscious and unconscious thoughts are the leading factors in what we choose to create when writing. Therefore, the id, ego, and superego are often at fault for creative lapses,

finding, “If the ego and superego are overly selective, relatively few creative ideas will reach the conscious mind” (Adams 42). Unfortunately, if students are being trained to take exams in which they are constantly monitoring themselves in order to complete a standard writing assignment, they are unable to tap into their creative minds in order to write something truly meaningful.

The idea of constantly monitoring what one writes, makes it difficult for writers to be creative because they find themselves trying to follow a writing protocol rather than following their innate instinct. Many writers can agree that it can be quite difficult to develop meaningful writing when focusing too heavily on monitoring rather than creating. When our students are trying to do well on standardized exams, they are constantly monitoring their writing, and “the repressive mechanism prevents the blocked writer from releasing powerful instincts and wishes, and writing takes on the character of a dangerous transgression” (Leader 49).

In the following section, I will break down the common emotional blocks that students’ undergo while trying to write for standardized exams, and how this leads to students’ inability to produce to writing because of the resulting writer’s block. The following categories are based on James Adams development of varying and overlapping emotional blocks that occur in a creative mind in his book, Conceptual Blockbusting.

- **Why Risk Failing?**
- **Safety in the Straight and Narrow**

- **Prioritizing Judgment Over Generation**
- **Authority vs. Inferiority**
- **Ding...A Magical Light Bulb**

### *Why Risk Failing?*

Let's face it, who really wants to consider themselves a failure? Most people can agree that the feeling of being a failure is often very upsetting and discouraging. This is especially true for teenagers when they fail assignments in school, because they are going through a very delicate and insecure period of their lives where, inevitably they become very sensitive to the concept of failure. Consequently, it doesn't take much for our students to feel overwhelmed by the thought of failing.

As James Adams explains, the fear to take a risk has been developed because, "Most of us have grown up rewarded when we produce the 'right' answer and punished if we make a mistake. When we fail we are made to realize that we have let others down. Similarly, we are taught to live safely and avoid risk whenever possible" (45). So why is the fear of taking a risk a problem? After students fail, they try to compensate for their failures by doing exactly what they are told and not falling back into anything that may have caused their failure previously. Therefore, students become overly conscious of their desire to succeed and not becoming a failure again. For some teachers they may think that

this is great because students are focusing on bettering their writing and not doing what made them fail previously. However, when it comes to writing you can't always focus on doing what you believe is right. Sometime you need to go with your gut instincts in order to write a successful paper.

Not too long ago, I met up for lunch with an old English teacher of mine from high school, and she told me an upsetting story about her recent experience with the English Regents Critical Lens Essay. A Critical Lens Essay, is an essay which gives students a quote to analyze along with one or two works of literature that they have previously read. Often times, in the English Regents, when students are writing their Critical Lens Essay, they are told to agree with the quote because it is the easiest way to write that particular essay. I too remember being told in high school "Agree, agree, agree with the quote if you want to pass." However, this was not the case for the Critical Lens essay this time around. It was the first time in years where students were supposed to disagree with the quote.

My friend recalled being mortified when looking at the exam and realizing that many of her students were trained to always agree with the quote since the regents rarely makes the quote disagreeable. The epidemic arose in her classes and her colleagues' classes where students disagreed with the quote, but since they were trained throughout their education to agree, they tried to write their essay to this protocol. Students ended up doing poorly because they couldn't produce any ideas. The fear of failure inhibited students' ability to take a chance

in their writing and write what they really felt about the quote because they were always told to *agree, agree, agree*. A plethora of students didn't write to their ability and did poorly on this essay because their minds were paralyzed with fear. When the exams were over, and the students went back to school, they told my friend about the distress they had gone through when trying to produce an essay. Furthermore, they explained how frustrating and confusing it was to produce an essay when their gut instincts were telling them not to follow their rationalized "trained" thoughts. They had no clue which feeling to follow because they were too scared of failing if they went with their innate instincts.

The outcome of this particular exam isn't a surprise for many teachers considering that these students have been drilled endlessly to write a particular way. They feel too scared to go against the grain and follow their innate instincts because of the excessive drilling they have had. Furthermore, the last thing many students want to do is fail the English Regents because they decided to not follow "the rules." The reality of failure takes a hold over students' minds and consequently, in this scenario, the students didn't provide strong papers, and unfortunately, some students couldn't come up with anything to write about because of this emotional block.

### *Safety in the Straight and Narrow*

Closely linked to students' fear to take a risk, is students' desire to follow the straight and narrow path, and not make waves in their writing. James Adams calls this emotional block, "no appetite for chaos," and explains that when trying to come to a solution it is not a linear approach. Often times, we must go through a "messy process" in order to form a solution (48). When our students' are writing for standardized exams, this "messy process" is not welcomed. Granted our students get a sheet of scrap paper to use as a draft or to jot down ideas, but how many of our students really use that scrap paper? As much as I would beg my students to please try to generate and organize their ideas before they began writing, they refused to. Exams are ordered, and timed, and as a result our students want their papers to be perfect from beginning to end in one shot. Therefore, they are unable to develop their ideas and their papers fall short. They may have an idea pop up in their mind, but they can't deviate from the straight and narrow path in order to explore the idea further. Unfortunately, these papers lack zeal because students are training themselves to block out any ideas that don't fit.

Furthermore, students become fanatical with not only writing a standardized essay in an orderly way, but also becoming more concerned with achieving an "aesthetic equilibrium" (Graves 8). Donald Graves explains that at an early age children develop their own meaning to what they develop on paper. For instance, a young child has no idea about any conventions and comes to their

own development of accepting conventions. The empty space on a page is used in whatever way their little hearts desire. As a result, Graves explains that children do not become blocked in writing until they become aware that they must follow a set of conventions, and that their own unique conventions are unacceptable (7).

Interestingly enough, Donald Graves claims that when it comes to student writing, "...the marring of the page suggests that the information is temporary, still under construction, while they wish the piece were completed" (8). Students who form this particular block are more concerned with getting the essay done in an orderly and clean fashion that they prevent themselves from creating meaningful work. But let's be honest, can you blame them? Who doesn't just want to get their exam done and over with? Our students become more concerned with the order of the exam that they are setting their goals at an unattainable standard. They become frustrated because they can't write perfectly in a linear approach, and they block out what they could accomplish if they could write recursively.

### *Prioritizing Judgment over Generation*

In order for a writer to truly express how he or she feels, it is essential that he or she judges what is being created. It takes time to write anything worthwhile, and most importantly it takes revisiting and revision through judging

our work. However, one of the biggest downfalls in student writing is often prioritizing judgment over generating ideas and work. Many of us are guilty of excessively judging our work and being too critical. We are our own worst enemies when it comes to assessing what we create. Consequently, judgment can create a monster that makes individuals stay stagnant in their thoughts and writing.

According to Adams, if criticism and judgment are, “applied too early or too indiscriminately in the problem-solving process, they are extremely detrimental to conceptualization” (49). As educators, we should all be aware that analysis and judgment are key processes in writing, but more so at the end of the writing process than the very beginning. This notion falls close to the concepts found in Bloom’s taxonomy. During the beginning of the writing process, a writer is merely trying to grapple with his or her ideas. Judging these ideas through criticism and analysis isn’t fully possible because these are merely ideas without much substance. It isn’t until a writer begins to think more deeply and explore these ideas that they can become more tangible and manipulative through the usage of criticism and analysis.

So why are our students monitoring their thoughts through constant criticism and judgment resulting in blocking? Most often, the common reason is due to students’ insecurities with audience expectations. “Writers are blocked when they face a new audience that they imagine will be critical, or an audience that has proved to be critical in the past” (Murray 45). When taking standardized

exams, students become fixated on audience expectations, because yet again, they are petrified to fail. They want to do well in their writing, and most importantly pass, so they develop ideas on what they perceive as accurate audience expectations for the writing assignment.

Unfortunately, students are many times unaware of what exactly the audiences' expectations are, and as a result they set their standards at impossible levels. They become frustrated that they can't achieve these imaginary standards through constantly criticizing everything they write, and sadly enough, these students become paralyzed in generating ideas and creating a piece of writing.

This is not an uncommon problem, and I will openly admit that I too have gone through this emotional block, even at the graduate level. Any paper I ever struggled with was often due to me being overly concerned with audience expectations. I would find myself unable to create anything because everything I did create was in my eyes, of low quality. Was everything I wrote really that awful? No, it wasn't. When I looked back at my drafts, I saw great ideas that I shut down before I even tried to explore and develop them further. I spent many sleepless nights in graduate school trying to make the "perfect paper" for my audience, when I could have just gone with the flow, exploring my ideas and created something in a matter of time.

I noticed that many of my students had this problem too in their writing, especially when I was new to teaching them. While talking to my students about this problem in their writing, I began to realize that my students were nervous to

write for me because they felt I had extremely high expectations, and they didn't want to disappoint me. They didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with me as their new teacher, and have me think that they weren't very good writers. They set completely unrealistic expectations for their writing, and as a result, many of my students were way off target when it was time for me to grade their exams. They were too concerned about what I would think of them and their writing and not concerned enough about exploring their writing and not being scared to make a mistake.

This is not to say that the audience isn't important, but in the beginning of the writing process, the last thing that students should be concerned about is what their audience will think. Rather, they should figure out what they think and then move to the next step. Luckily, when I identified this problem with my students, we were able to discuss the issue at hand, and their writing did improve because they became less judgmental and more open to exploration.

#### *Authority vs. Inferiority*

Our students are at an age where they may say they respect authority, but inevitably, they want to defy and challenge authority more so than being respectful. This is nothing that any teacher, parent, or adult wouldn't already know. Now unlike the previous categories, I have not found research to prove that authority plays a role in causing an emotional block other than my own

discourse with my students. However, what I have come to hypothesize through numerous conversations with my students is that in some way standardized exams are intertwined with a threatening sense of authority towards students and their writing.

Many of my students have said the same thing, “What’s the point of me writing this essay for an exam when I don’t have time to really write anything and what I say doesn’t really matter?” Many of my students agree that they feel this way about essays in exams, and most importantly they feel like what they have to write is meaningless unless it is exactly what the teacher is looking for. Perhaps they have had bad experiences in the past where their English teachers wanted them to write particular answers and didn’t want them to explore their ideas, but most educators can agree that that is the last thing we want our students to do.

However, standardized exams limit the exploration of meaningful writing for our students because it evokes order and authority. If students don’t do well, it is because they didn’t fulfill the standards of the exam. Our students recognize this, and they are frustrated by the fact that these exams take control over what they feel they can and cannot do in writing. Overtime, they begin to feel the individual no longer matters in writing, because everyone is supposed to accomplish and mirror each others’ writing.

Consequently, they enter the exams with a negative disposition, and they have no desire to do anything other than write to the exam and its audience. In a way, I found students feel defeated after taking these exams for years, and just

don't know how to handle them other than shutting down out of pure frustration and exhaustion. It isn't easy constantly monitoring your thoughts and ideas to standardized criteria in order to write a "successful" essay. However, this defeated attitude towards authoritative exams doesn't get students very far in their writing. Because our students are so negative and feel that they are inferior to these large scale exams, they don't have the positive attitude that will enable them to get engaged in their writing. As a result, they just sit during the timed exam and only find themselves able to scribble little nothings and block out any sense of creativity and thought that may produce an interesting and well-written paper.

### *Ding...A Magic Light Bulb*

Remember those cartoons where a character would be trying so hard to think of something, and finally the light bulb would pop up above his or her head and the idea magically appeared? Don't we all wish this was really the case? More often than not, an idea doesn't always come up out of nowhere at the perfect time. How many times have you thought of the perfect comeback to somebody when it was too late to use it? It's happened to all of us, because whether we realized it or not, our minds were unconsciously thinking about the issue at hand over a period time after the event took place.

This newly found idea didn't appear out of thin air. As Adams explains, "...there is general agreement that answers to problems often suddenly appear in

the mind, usually after thinking about the problem in some depth and often at strange times” (50). Ideas take time, and don’t magically come to us during the writing process when needed. Unfortunately, the myth that ideas are supposed to come at the perfect time is not fully understood by our students, especially when taking pressure-filled exams.

While I was student teaching, I informally asked some of my students how they felt about coming up with ideas when writing for these exams, and these were some of the replies that received: “I don’t know why, but my mind freezes and I can’t come up with anything to say. I understand the novels that I’ve read and the quote, but when it comes to writing about it, there’s nothing.” “I feel stupid, because I should have so much to write about, but I can’t write anything.” “I’m frustrated and sick of not having anything to work with.” Across the board students’ feel that writing should come naturally. They should just be able to write about something easily with no problem, where ideas are just pouring onto the paper. “Many students are unaware of this craftsmanlike view of writing; they believe that good writers magically spin a perfect product out of their heads in one try” (Daniels and Zemelman 21). When this doesn’t occur, they become frustrated and angry about their writing and themselves.

Students begin to feel like a failure, because they can’t write at the drop of a hat. This feeling of failure and frustration adds to the writer’s anxiety which inevitably causes, “Both retrieval and application [to] suffer if the writer suffers from a breakdown of concentration or attentional overload brought on by

frustration and fear” (Kellogg 113). Our students are emotionally blocking their writing because they have unrealistic expectations on how writing occurs. One thing I found particularly useful, was showing my students some of my writing (which at the time was just lesson plans that I’ve been drafting). Once they realized that my writing takes awhile, and ideas don’t always naturally occur for me, they became a little more accepting and understanding of the complexity of the writing process.

However, the biggest problem with generating thoughts, is that students aren’t given the time to fully incubate, because they have no time to think when taking a timed exam. Students could come up with answers to their questions, if only standardized exams allowed the time to do so. I will discuss this in more detail in a later chapter on *Environmental Issues in Writing*, “I Need to Incubate!”

### **Environmental Issues in Writing**

One of the most important aspects I believe in any classroom is to have a welcoming environment and a sense of community. Students who feel comfortable among their peers and teachers in the classroom will not only enjoy working and being engaged with class material, but they will also thrive and grow as students and individuals. Without a sense of security and comfort in a learning environment, students’ performance will suffer greatly because they won’t be open and eager to learn, or for that matter, even want to be in the classroom.

Furthermore, if there is no comfort and enjoyment in the classroom environment, students won't become involved. Therefore, the way students write in the classroom will of course factor into the kind of environment they are developing in as writers.

There are two contrasting approaches to writing that can be used in the classroom. The old traditional approach to writing views writing as a linear process, and focuses on the product, through an orderly step by step process. The more progressive view of writing sees writing as a recursive process where, "writing is a process to be experienced" and students are encouraged to move fluidly back and forth throughout different writing processes (Zemelman and Daniels 18). Many educators will agree, it is only natural for the organic progressive writing process to be more beneficial and welcoming to our students, rather than the traditional approach that looks at the process of writing unrealistically.

Although many English teachers try to use the recursive process in student writing through doing freewriting, brainstorming, using graphic organizers, drafting, peer review, and so on, this rarely occurs when students are taking standardized exams. Students are forced to take on the linear approach which is often problematic for students when trying to conceptualize because according to the findings by Flower and Hayes, Perl, Emig, and others, "real writers normally compose by going back and forth among the activities of planning, generating, organizing, and editing" (Meyer and Smith 68-69).

The need to write without constraints in thoughts and movement is necessary for our students when trying to develop their ideas further and explore meaning in their writing. If students are forced to write semi-perfectly in a single rough draft and then fix everything in order from beginning to end for a final copy, they are not going to put together well-written papers. Furthermore, Perl coined the term “shuttling” to explain how student writers and even skilled writers, “...are writing, moving their ideas and their discourse forward; at the next they are backtracking, rereading, and digesting what has been written” (Meyer and Smith 69).

It comes to no surprise that our students are struggling to create, because standardized writing does not allow shuttling. As Meyer and Smith suggest, “Shuttling, or dialogical thinking, naturally goes throughout the composing process, and writers who allow it to happen usually have little difficulty with fluency” (69). Unfortunately, standardized writing in exams do not allow fluidity in writing because of the environmental constraints they impose on our students. Our students are being trained to write in a particular setting that is unrealistic, unwelcoming, and unnatural to the recursive approach to writing. Consequently our students are not adjusting well to this environment, and are blocking when trying to write. The following environmental constraints listed below will be explored further. Note that some ideas overlap with the emotional and psychological blocks previously discussed because these two concepts are intertwined.

- **Speed Racer and the Ticking Clock**
- **I Need to Incubate!**
- **Mixed Signals and an Unsupportive Environment**

### *Speed Racer and the Ticking Clock*

The clock is ticking in what seems like lightning speed, and you're just trying to keep your hand moving as quickly as possible. Your hand cramps up, and you shake it out real fast and then get back to writing. Your hand is moving faster than your mind, but time is almost up and you have to have something on your paper. This is a common scene for students or in general anyone when writing under timed pressure. Writing under the pressure of a ticking clock can make it difficult for most writers to feel proud and successful of the writing they create. With short deadlines, time becomes the writers' worst enemy. Granted, we all need a deadline when writing is due, but is the time given during an exam really enough to complete multiple choice, short answers, and sometimes two essays? Students are overwhelmed with sections to complete and left with virtually no time to write an essay at the end of the exam.

The amount of time given to student writing in standardized exams affects our students in numerous ways, and often the first reaction is anxiety. As discussed previously, anxiety will often lead to writing apprehension and blocking in student writing. This is because, rather than the writer feeling at ease and

prepared to begin the essay, the writer feels more like he or she is on a rollercoaster just hoping to get to the end of this awful ride. The anxiety a student faces during a timed exam can do one or two things. Anxiety for students can produce almost an adrenaline rush where they can become extremely focused and quick at connecting their thoughts and ideas into writing, or it can be paralyzing where students are frazzled and have no idea where to begin. However, either way, students disregard many resourceful tools they have learned to use in writing because they only have time to write one draft. Students need to move at a quick pace, because they need to complete an essay in order to get points awarded to their exam. Consequently, our students take on the linear approach to writing, rather than using the much proclaimed and more productive recursive approach because of these time restrictions.

Students are sometimes left with only ten or twenty minutes to put together a cohesive idea. What can a writer really accomplish in twenty minutes? It is practically impossible for students to do anything other than jot down a couple of ideas, or maybe write out a brief outline before getting started in writing their essay. I would ask my students to hand in all of their materials when writing an in-class essay for an exam, and when I examined how my students created their essays, it was for the most part written with only one draft. Some students would organize a few of their ideas and make up their own kind of outline, but for the most part my students created essays out of whatever they could think of at the moment.

Unfortunately, for the majority of my students that wrote one draft, they also rarely went back to change ideas or sentences. Many times their ideas were scattered because they would be jumping from thought to thought and trying to make it fit with whatever has already been written. Clearly time restricts our students in accomplishing more meaning, understanding, and cohesiveness in their writing. How are our students expected to write decent essays when they are unable to explore all of the possibilities they can write about? As explained by Donald Murray, “We write to think—to be surprised by what appears on the page; to explore our world with language; to discover meaning that teaches us and that may be worth sharing with others. We do *not* know what we want to say before we say it; we write to know what we want to say” (3-4). Writing is a way to explore and develop our ideas. Our students need to write using different strategies before they even begin tying these ideas into a cohesive paper. When our students are unable to explore through writing, they are blocking and revealing their scattered minds onto a disjointed paper.

One of the best things a writer can do when in the early stages of trying to write an essay is freewriting and prewriting. Freewriting can be guided, or simply students writing about what comes to mind with an assignment. Whichever the case, students get the juices flowing where they are working and thinking about some aspect of their writing and or assignment. “ In these states it feels as though more things come to mind, bubble up, and that somehow they fall more directly

into language” (Elbow 204). Without doing something like freewriting, how are our students expected to come up with ideas? Out of thin air perhaps?

This too goes along with prewriting activities such as brainstorming, clustering, mapping, listing, ect. If students are unable to perform these beneficial writing activities, how can we expect them to create meaningful writing? Our students have no starting point to bounce off of, because time doesn’t allow students to stop and think before they put their pen on the paper and write an introduction to a non-existent essay. However, prewriting activities are not enough for our students in generating ideas for writing. Our students also need time to let the essay question settle in their mind and actually think or ponder possible topics and ideas to write about.

*I Need to Incubate!*

Time is not only imperative for our students to use necessary writing approaches and tools to unblock their ideas, but it is also necessary for our students to incubate. Many times, writers find it difficult to begin writing a paper right away and find that it isn’t until the deadline is closely approaching that the ideas come together and create a worthwhile paper. This is also true for our students. Often, you hear from your students that they believe they write best when they procrastinate and have the pressure of a deadline to make them produce writing. However, these ideas didn’t come out of nowhere, and your

students most likely have no clue that they have been actually pondering these ideas unconsciously for quite sometime. This process is known as incubation.

Incubation, as earlier mentioned, is a process where our unconscious thought thinks about a particular problem randomly over a period of time, and eventually after incubating long enough an idea or answer to a problem suddenly comes to mind (Adams 50). Incubation is a necessary step to creating writing, because our minds need to be given the time to analyze and approach possible solutions and ideas. As Adams suggests, “You should allow the mind to struggle with problems over time. Incubation is important in problem-solving. It is poor planning not to allow adequate time for incubation in the solution to an important problem” (50). Incubation becomes a key component in conceptualization and identification of our thoughts. By writers going through the process of incubation, they allow themselves the freedom to explore possible solutions and be confident that they can either reject or accept their findings. Given the freedom of time during incubation, it becomes possible for more thought provoking, analytical, and critical ideas to become present in student writing. Unfortunately, our students are not given this time to incubate when taking standardized exams.

It becomes more difficult for students to formulate ideas because these ideas do not appear out of thin air. However, as mentioned earlier, this becomes frustrating for students when they don’t understand why they can’t just begin writing right away. If our students are given the time to ponder their ideas and

feel free to think about random thoughts that have to do with the assignment, they aren't allowing the process of brainstorming occur. The only possible way for students to be able to conceptualize what they want to write about is through having the time to brainstorm their options in writing for more than, oh let's say five minutes. Students need to incubate so they unblock the unconscious mind, and produce meaningful work.

### *Unsupportive Environment*

Although there are many more environmental issues that can negatively affect our students in exploring and unblocking their minds in writing, I have found that working in an unsupportive environment seems to be a big issue among many adolescent students. Think about how classrooms are often set up when students are taking exams. They are organized with desks in rows, sometimes it is a large group of students, other times it is the size of an average class, it can be held in a gymnasium, auditorium, math classroom, or even science classroom. Do these various environments come across as inviting for the writer? Many of my students voiced concerns about what it is like for them when they are trying to write an essay in an environment unlike the one they are used to (such as an English classroom), and a large majority of my students agreed that testing in unfamiliar environments caused them to feel more anxious. Rather than being

able to write in their English classroom where they feel they are writing in a safe space, our students are writing in an unfamiliar unsupportive environment.

As Donald Murray explains, “The experienced writer usually has a place in which the writer is used to writing. That becomes part of the ritual of writing” (48). Although most writers may agree that they would prefer to write at home in their bedrooms or outside rather than a classroom, our students feel comfortable enough writing in an English classroom, as long as they feel they are in a supportive and welcoming environment. If students are regularly writing in the classroom, they begin to produce a level of comfort and can find their niche for writing in school. Not all writing can be done at home; therefore, developing a welcoming writing environment in the classroom helps make writing for standardized exams less frightening. Our students need to become more comfortable with finding their own way to make a high risk environment feel like a low risk environment. This can occur more easily if students see the environment as one they are confident in.

Furthermore, the benefit of students writing in a comfortable setting such as their classrooms allows students to relax because of the confidence they have developed as writers. Since they are used to writing in the particular setting that they are writing in for a standardized exam, they are able to relax and allow the mind to ponder and think before rushing to write. James Adams explains the benefits of relaxation in the writing process when stating, “It is also important to be able to relax in the midst of problem-solving. Your overall compulsiveness is

less fanatical when you are relaxed, and the mind is more likely to deal with seemingly “silly” combinations of thoughts. If you are never relaxed, your mind is usually on guard against non-serious activities, with resulting difficulties in the type of thinking necessary for fluent and flexible conceptualization” (50). Our students will inherently be able to feel a sense of relaxation when they feel comfort in knowing that they write in this particular environment often and have succeeded in their writing. The sense of familiarity will enable to students to think back to different moments when they wrote in the classroom, and will cause them to look back at positive experiences to help them open up in their writing for this particular experience. Students who are able to find their writing niche will not only be able to break through environmental barriers, but will also break through their mental barriers.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

So, now the important question is, where do we go from here? Our students are clearly struggling in conceptualizing and breaking through their mental blocks when trying to write for standardized exams. Both the psychological and environmental issues are intertwined and impact our students’ minds when trying to write. Something needs to be altered in order for our students to better succeed and reach their fullest potential when writing for high stakes exams. In the most ideal situations, it would be easy to say let’s just get rid

of standardized exams, but we all know too well that they aren't going away anytime soon. As much as authentic assessment and portfolios are wonderful alternative forms of assessment, they are costly and time consuming. Not many schools or states are willing to issue authentic assessment for these particular reasons among the many other reasons, which I will not even begin discussing in this particular essay.

The true issue at hand is that inevitably our students will have to take these exams while being able to break through their blocks in order to show their audience that they are capable of writing. The most common problem that is woven throughout most of the issues earlier discussed is lack of time. Time is not only an environmental issue, where students are forced to rush through an exam, not incubate, and be forced to not use the recursive approach to writing, but it also affects our students' psychologically. Students that aren't given enough time are unable to really think about what they are writing. As a result, they steer clear of taking chances in their writing, write to the test and unrealistic audience expectations, and judge their ideas rather than explore them. All of these factors play a role in students' tendency to block and their creation of disjointed papers that lack passion and creativity.

A possible solution that I have come up with based on the discourse I have had with my students is developing an exam in which students aren't racing the clock. Most standardized exams are formatted similarly in which there is often a reading comprehension, listening, and a content section in which students are

being assessed through answering multiple choice and sometimes short answer questions. As much as some would say multiple choice is easy and doesn't require much critical thinking, most students would disagree. Multiple choices can be draining, and sometimes very discouraging when students find themselves second guessing and analyzing answers they are unsure of. My students always complained that they would rather have short answer questions than multiple choice because they always found themselves over-analyzing the different answers. Consequently, our students' brains are, as they would say, "fried" between reading, listening, and answering multiple choice questions. Our students are mentally exhausted by the time they reach the one or two essays that need to be completed in only a short period of time.

A simple solution for this problem would be to allow to students to complete the multiple choice section the first day of the exam, then they can be given more time, and most importantly a fresh start to complete the essay section the following day. If a school decides to split the exam into two days, they can also weigh out the options of students having an opportunity to see the essay question the day before. Some may say this is cheating, but I ask those people, what is so wrong with students having the night to get their ideas and thoughts together? If our students have the night to incubate they will be much more prepared to put their thoughts into writing the next day. After all, our students are being tested on how well they write, not how well they have memorized the information. If students go home and review whatever notes will help them write

the essay the following day, they can focus more on creating a well put together essay with cohesive ideas.

Also if students are being given the opportunity to have more time to write, it would be a good idea to have students awarded points for whatever pre-writing activities they go through during the writing process. Since students have trained themselves to rush through the essay section, they may still have this same desire to rush even when they are given more time to write. If students are being told by the exam that what they do before they write is just as important as the product, they will have to use whatever prewriting techniques that they find particularly useful and beneficial to their writing, before they begin writing the essay. Furthermore, this will also allow our students to slow down and actually think before they write. They will prevent the writer's block that occurs during the usual test-taking process, and will succeed in creating a cohesive and meaningful paper through having the time to develop and explore their ideas in more depth.

Another solution that would allow students to explore their ideas in more depth before writing out their final paper, is to set up the exams where English classes are rotating throughout the day in computer labs so that students can type their essays rather than write them by hand. Computers have become very useful for aiding writers during the writing process. Henriette Klauser claims that when writing, "Sometimes you need to begin in the middle and go back to the beginning and then write the end and then stop. Often you do not even know how

the thing best begins until you have figured out the end” (13). Writing is a rigorous and evolving process where the writer must have mobility and the ability to go back and forth with ideas when trying to create. Furthermore, “The advent of personal computers and word-processing programs has helped immensely to give writers freedom in this regard. Even the simplest word processor program can ‘cut and paste,’ allowing you to rearrange sentences and whole paragraphs. We no longer feel compelled to think in terms of a finished product” (Klauser 13).

There are many benefits when cutting and pasting during the writing process in which students are able to move around their ideas and try to make sense of them as they go along. Rather than students writing out one paper and looking at their writing as one single process to the completion of a final copy, students will be more eager to think critically about what they are typing. Knowing that they have the ease to move their ideas around without having to rewrite an entire paper and go back and forth developing different sections of the paper at different times will make writing look less linear and more organic. Through our students typing, they will essentially be gaining more mobility of their thoughts while writing and this will enable students to not feel as anxious and want to explore their ideas further.

Of course having rotating blocks are not always possible in all schools depending on what technological resources are available, but for those schools that do have one or two computer labs, it would be worthwhile to develop a rotating block for English classes to type their essays. Furthermore, if computer

labs are used, it is imperative that our students are comfortable with writing in this environment. I would suggest that teachers urge their students to go to the computer labs during their free periods or before or after school, in addition to teachers scheduling their classes in the computer lab when doing writing activities. Students must feel confident with their typing skills, knowledge of the computer, and creation of writing on the computer in order for this usage of technology to be successful when taking standardized exams.

Lastly, and most importantly, if we want our students to break through their writers' blocks, we must make sure that our students don't psychologically feel threatened when writing for standardized exams. Ideally, we must prepare our students to the best of our abilities. Rather than just preparing our students for standardized writing through teaching them how to write a five paragraph essay, we must teach our students the tools and strategies that will make them feel confident as writers. Through teaching our students how to do prewriting activities such as listing, mapping, clustering, drawing, and freewriting, they will know what techniques work best for their individual writing styles. The last thing our students need to feel is threatened and anxious when taking an exam. If students have learned different techniques, approaches, and strategies in the writing process to form ideas and develop these ideas further, they will not feel as if they are at a dead end when anxiety takes a hold of their minds. Students who are prepared with the tools to write will know what strategies to turn to when they begin blocking.

Our job as educators is to make our students feel confident in their knowledge and abilities in writing through what we teach them. If we prepare our students so that they psychologically are prepared, and surround our students in a supportive and welcoming environment, our students will break through their blocks and create papers with substance and meaning. Most importantly, if we make changes to reduce the psychological and environmental threats that our students face, we will have succeeded in creating fluent writers that have strengthened and tailored their writing abilities for not just the writing of essays in standardized exams, but all varieties of writing.

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